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ABSTRACT

It is suggested that second language teachers often view themselves and are viewed by others as technicians, passive purveyors of prescriptive content, but that they should be encouraged to perceive themselves as professionals. Professionals are defined as those who, by virtue of knowledge and experience in teaching and learning, make instructional decisions and control the learning process. The discussion proceeds to examine three aspects of professionalism in second language education, especially as it relates to English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teaching. First, it recommends development in ESL teachers of a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. Second, it is argued that teachers should personally establish explicit objectives with regard to attitude, content, and process in the classroom. Finally, it is proposed that the best time to instill this kind of professional commitment is during ESL teacher education. Benefits of a professional approach to ESL teaching include improved instruction, increased creativity, better teacher morale, and an ability to tolerate ambiguity. (Contains 8 references.) (MSE)

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Developing Professionalism in Second Language Education

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DEVELOPING PROFESSIONALISM IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Introduction

The topic of this paper concerns professionalism in second language education. In other words, it is about ESL teachers being in charge of their own teaching. While TESL education programs provide background in language theory, methodology, and syllabus design, an essential dimension that is frequently neglected is encouraging teachers to view themselves as professionals.

The conventional view of a "professional" in second language education is one who conducts research in language acquisition and learning, while those teach in ESL classrooms are "technicians", passive purveyors of prescriptive content. This is not a unique perception, as evidenced by the salary level of the average ESL teacher. Moreover, all too frequently, the primary criterion for securing an ESL teaching position is English fluency. Traditional ESL instructional methodology, consisting of a sequential order of units and lessons in a self-contained, prescriptive English language curriculum, lends itself to passivity. Within this context, ESL teachers can indeed become technicians; and the quality of language learning experienced by their students is questionable. As alarming is the danger

that qualified ESL teachers, those who have authentic background and experience in second language education, may themselves accept the status of technicians.

This paper discusses three components of professionalism in second language education. First, the advantages of developing in ESL teachers an awareness of the constructivist approach to teaching and learning will be described. Next, the need for ESL teachers develop attitude, content, and process goals will be discussed. Finally, the role of TESL education in nurturing professionalism in second language teaching will be considered.

To begin, for the purposes of this paper, a *professional* in second language education is defined a teacher who, by virtue of knowledge and experience in language teaching and learning, makes instructional decisions and controls the learning process. The professional TESL teacher is actively engaged in proactive teaching and in mediating classroom situations. This is in contrast to the teacher who operates as a technician by passively following a prescribed curriculum and reacting to student performance.

The constraints that encourage teachers to become technicians must be acknowledged. First, at the risk of introducing a cliche, the classroom is a highly complex setting. ESL teachers frequently cope with large a number of students, many of whom may be resistant to independent

production of language, preferring to remain passive during class. Furthermore, teachers face the dilemma of fulfilling administrative expectations which may be institutionalized into a prescribed syllabus with standardized testing. Teacher accountability and continued employment may be directly related to student performance on this testing system.

These and other constraints can result in the ESL teacher developing feelings of being overloaded and powerless, and encourage them to cope by seeking ways to simplify. The path of least resistance is to become a technician by abandoning professional independence in favor of passively following mandated instructional materials. After all, an established syllabus provides an organizational structure of content along with a systematic and coordinated system of presentation. Teachers can fulfill obligations by covering the required exercises and focusing on correct responses, assuming that correctness indicates learning. If students fail to perform well on the tests, it is the fault of the students or the materials, but not the teacher. Such constraints are likely to remain part of the teacher's life for the foreseeable future, but this does not mean that the ESL teacher is doomed to an eternal role of technician.

Constraints exist in every profession. An ESL teacher who thinks as a professional recognizes constraints while making decisions and maintaining control of instruction.

Effects of Student Situational Interpretations on Learning

For ESL teachers to accept the role of professionals, it is necessary that they understand the nature of teaching as supported by recent research. Despite its weaknesses, the process-product research of the 1970's established that specific teaching behaviors result in improved student learning (Brophy & Good, 1986). In addition, it established that instructional management, that is identifying the desired learning outcomes and keeping students on task, is essential for effective teaching, concluding that effective teachers are those who are actively engaged with and in control of their instruction.

A more recent view of the relationship between instruction and learning, and how students interpret their instruction, is the "cognitive mediational paradigm" (Duffy & Roehler, 1989; Winne & Marx, 1982). A contructivist view greatly influenced by Piagetian theory, this theory contends that students are constantly striving to make sense of classroom activities, or in Piagetian terms to establish equilibrium, and adapt themselves to the dynamics of schooling in order to survive. In short, students want to pass -- preferably with high grades. By interpreting various classroom activities and their consequences, students construct their own sense of "school reality" to establish equilibrium. Frequently, this interpretation of "school

reality" does not entail learning, but only what is necessary for passing. Thus, in order to make sense of instruction and to survive schooling, students construct interpretations of teachers' instructional acts on the bases of their prior experiences in school.

The resulting student construction may not match the teacher's intended objective. For example, a teacher assigns a worksheet in transforming sentences from active to passive voice for practice. The teacher intends that the worksheets will be a means of giving students the opportunity to gain facility in the use of the passive voice and may further intend that practice with these transformations will transfer to independent production. The students, however, may conclude that the purpose of the exercise is accurate completion of the worksheets, making no connection of the activity to their own independent language use. The students have constructed an interpretation that makes sense to them in view of their previous experiences with worksheets: teachers collect worksheets, correct them, and award good grades to those with a large number of correct responses.

Teachers who are in active control of instruction have opportunities to mediate such interpretations of classroom activities and to develop more appropriate learning purposes. They assess student actions and reactions during instruction and clearly communicate their learning goals to

correlate student understanding with the intended outcomes (Pearson, Roehler, Dole, & Duffy, 1992).

Objectives: Content, Process, and Attitude

Essential to the development of professionalism in ESL instruction is the establishment of explicit objectives that are clear to both the teacher and the students. Although this may be stating the obvious, in many situations the ESL teacher is presented with institutional objectives which remove curricular decisions from the classroom instructor; thus, the teacher has neither personal nor professional involvement in the curriculum. Moreover, such objectives are ordinarily limited to the content of the course, or at least the content that the institution desires students to know at the end of a given academic term. Yet, ESL teachers do more than pass language content on to their students; their instruction also involves processes and attitudes. Thus, instructional goals and objectives should involve all three aspects of classroom instruction: content, process, and attitude.

Content objectives refer to the specific information about language that the student must learn and on which he or she will be evaluated. As previously mentioned, these objectives may have been mandated by the institution so that the teacher may have had little or no opportunity to influence curriculum development. Even institutions that

establish objectives through the cooperative effort of curriculum committees may provide little opportunity for input from those who are not members of the committee. In such situations, teachers justifiably conclude that they have been deprived of decision-making roles and are thereby withdraw into the roles of technicians who passively follow a prescribed curriculum and react only to student performance. Nevertheless, although an ESL teacher may have had little influence on developing curriculum, the process in which content objectives are met in the classroom provides several opportunities for active decision-making.

Process objectives refer to the methods and procedures used to meet the content objectives; in other words, how teaching works. Here the ESL teacher has a wide range of decision-making opportunities. The first step would be to identify the constraints, such as packaged objectives, overloaded classrooms, or poor instructional materials, than plan how both the administrative and personal objectives could be met. In this way, the teacher becomes a decision-making professional who has taken control of instruction.

Content and process objectives depend on *attitude* objectives, which involve developing positive conceptual understandings that motivate students and mediate instruction.

For ESL teachers to control the instructional process,

they must develop positive attitudes about language education, and not have erroneous nor negative concepts about teaching. In other words, *to be professional, ESL teachers must think of themselves as professionals*, and accept responsibility for both successful and unsuccessful instructional results. Moreover, just as teaching is an active, decision-making process, a fundamental goal in ESL instruction is to help students understand that language is an active, meaningful, and productive activity with the goal of communication. Such a concept contributes to positive attitudes about language by establishing accurate expectations; for example, completing worksheets on verb forms is neither meaningful nor productive.

Developing Professionalism in TESL

The obvious time to instill professional commitment is during the TESL education program. Yet, to what extent does teacher education inspire professionalism? While mandated objectives and curricula are conducive to turning teachers into technicians, the teacher education program may furnish the institutions with finish products from the outset. ESL teachers may not behave as professionals because the manner of educating them to be teachers has not been linked to putting them in charge of their own teaching. Rather than encouraging future teachers to be independent decision-makers, courses often present some authority's approach to

language learning with little opportunity for independent and critical thinking. The result is graduates who have learned to wait for others to direct them and who are unable to respond reflectively and creatively to teaching situations they encounter in the classroom.

The cognitive-mediational paradigm discussed above is therefore relevant at the tertiary level; students in TESL education programs also construct interpretations of instructional activities in order to make sense of the class and to survive. When a TESL education program delivers theory, methodology, and the instructional procedures in a manner in which students react passively, the system produces graduates who are compliant and reluctant to be decision-makers.

This is not to suggest that teacher education programs scrap courses in theoretical foundations and instructional methodology and operate on the basis of laissez-faire and rugged individualism. A strong grounding in learning theory, language acquisition and learning, and up-to-date methodology are essential to produce teachers of quality. Nevertheless, TESL education programs should involve students actively in their own learning, in effect putting them in charge of their own development as professionals. When teachers are required uncritically to follow materials, theories, and established procedures, they

become passive, depending on the system rather than taking charge (Apple, 1983).

The desired product of the TESL education program is a teacher who is creative and flexible and who can provide authentic occasions for language production that are not anticipated by a mandated curriculum. The teacher must have the confidence in his or her professionalism to deviate from the syllabus when the occasion demands it, and must be able to communicate this confidence to his or her immediate supervisors. In short, the teacher must be in charge.

Fianlly, a related aspect of professionalism concerns teacher morale. We surely hope that a teacher has chosen a career in language education because it offers challenging and personally rewarding work. When personal control of the career is removed by requiring adherence to mandated approaches and procedures, the teacher is robbed of professional dignity.

Professionalism is not component that can be directly taught; but it can be encouraged and nurtured. Because it lies in the affective domain, a commitment to professionalism is difficult to observe. Yet, teacher educators in their roles as mediators can organize instruction to nurture this commitment and observe indications that their students are assuming control of instruction. An intensive study of teaching styles has shown that effective teachers construct a

model of teaching that works for them in a specific setting (Dillon, 1989). Students who have control of their own learning will more likely be teachers who take charge of their own teaching.

Another indication of professionalism is the ability to tolerate ambiguity. For example, rather than insist on a single procedure for teaching language, a professional is willing to accommodate a variety of complex options. As part of their education, students in TESL education should be encouraged to select a variety of principles from among several theories and procedures depending on the situation.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to discuss the development of professionalism in second language education. A professional was defined as a decision-maker who is in charge of instruction. This was in contrast to a technician who passively follows instructional materials and reacts only to student performance. Despite the real constraints facing language teachers, developing professionalism is both possible and essential and ESL teachers have the potential to establish professionalism through the establishment of content, process and attitude objectives. Finally, TESL education programs have both the opportunity and the obligation to instill professionalism into their students. This means educating ESL instructors to be actively engaged

in a proactive mediational role rather than merely monitoring student responses to textbook exercises.

The problem with instilling professionalism in second language education involves a dilemma. Students in an ESL class construct a simple interpretation of the purpose of the class -- passing tests -- while teachers view the course as a means of improving language competence. Thus ESL teachers fail to realize how their students may have constructed an interpretation of what is important. ESL teachers may have been encouraged, or in some cases intimidated, in their beliefs by university professors who argue that any deviation from the current theory of language acquisition or learning is obsolete or "atheoretical". Such views are contradicted by recent research indicating that effective teaching is comprised of the ability to combine aspects of a variety of theories for the purpose of making instructional decisions which are relevant to a particular classroom situation (Duffy, 1990; Leinhardt, 1990).

The challenge in second language education is to promote inspired teaching through professionalism. This involves a recognition by TESL education programs that effective teaching does not originate in a particular theory of language acquisition or approach to language instruction. When teachers invest their methodology of teaching into a single theory or approach, they have abdicated their

responsibility for instructional decisions and become passive technicians. On the other hand, professionalism is more likely to result when language teachers are encouraged to make decisions on a variety of philosophical and theoretical approaches.

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